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**HOW TO WRITE**

**Successful Essays,  
Dissertations  
& Exams**

CHRIS MOUNSEY

## **How to Write Successful Essays, Dissertations, and Exams**

Chris Mounsey is Professor of English at the University of Winchester. Chris is author of *Christopher Smart: Clown of God*, a biography of the eighteenth-century poet; *Understanding the Poetry of William Blake Through a Dialectic of Contraries*, and many other books and articles.

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# **HOW TO WRITE**

## Successful Essays, Dissertations, and Exams

**SECOND EDITION**

**CHRIS MOUNSEY**

**OXFORD**  
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## Preface to the Second Edition

Much has changed in the methods of gathering information since the first edition of this book came out. In 2001 Google was only three years old and led researchers to few websites carrying information reliable enough to stand up as academic evidence. Now, as well as Google, Bing, and Yahoo, there is a bewildering range of specifically academic websites offering e-books, journals, and primary materials, so much so that today's student might never need to open a book or go into a library. But even if this is so, the method of writing an essay which demonstrates that your opinion about something is valid, by putting together an argument based on relevant and trustworthy evidence, remains the same.

### WHO IS THE BOOK FOR?

It has become clear that nowadays more and more students are coming to university ill-equipped in the knowledge of the basic methods for researching and writing essays. This means that the first year of university study can be very difficult, even alienating, and present a student with a huge change in the way they approach their work.

However, there is only one way to write a successful academic essay. This is not to say all essays should be the same. As with football, by playing according to the rules, every game is different.

The book therefore aims to give a graded approach to essay writing for students from A-level up to Master's degree. It will be most appropriate for those studying arts, law, humanities, and social sciences. However, it will also be useful to science students when they have to present information in narrative form.

It lays out a method that can be adapted for most types of assessments: assessed essays, exams, oral presentations, posters, rationales, dissertations, and long essays.

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# Introduction

# 1

## CONTENTS

- 1 Why an essay?
- 2 How is the information in this book arranged?
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## Why an essay?

The essay is a piece of writing designed for academic purposes. It is short enough to be read at one sitting. It communicates detailed information about a subject between people who share a common background of knowledge (experts in the field). In the modern academic world it is often called a 'paper' and published in a specialist journal.

A lot of the work you do from A-level to university is assessed in the form of the essay. It is long enough for you to show that you know something about a particular subject. It is short enough that your tutor can mark it conveniently.

But an essay written for the assessment of your academic progress is a strange beast. Where an academic 'paper' is a means of communicating new information to other people who share a common background of knowledge, an essay is a means of communicating information to your tutor about yourself, and how much you know. The essay you write should tell your tutor that you have understood the information that you have been taught, and that you can argue about it. **You do not have to say anything new.** You have to show that you are becoming one of those people who share the common background of knowledge.

In other words, you have to write your essays in a specific way so that they will show you off to the best advantage. This book is intended to tell you how to go about writing academic essays.

## How is the information in this book arranged?

**Chapters 2–6** lay out the **method for researching and writing essays** for:

- Anyone who has not written an essay before or for a long time
- Confident A-level students who intend to go to university
- First-year undergraduate students
- ALL students who are writing their first essay at the start of a new course

**Chapter 7** gives information about:

- **Time management** for busy students

**Chapters 8 and 9** give more **detailed information**:

- For those who are becoming confident about essay writing and want to get higher grades
- Second-, third- (and fourth- in Scotland and Ireland) year undergraduate students
- Masters level students

**Chapter 10** applies the essay-writing method for:

- All students who have to take **exams**
- Those who are confronted with other forms of assessment, such as oral presentations, posters, and rationales

**Chapter 11** applies the essay-writing method for:

- Students who have to research and write a **dissertation or long essay**
- Masters level students

**Chapter 12** gives **ESSENTIAL** information for **ALL** students about **referencing, notes and bibliography**. It's at the end because although it will be the part you refer to most often, it should be the last thing you do.

Some reading routes	Beginner information	Further details
Your first essay	page 5 – 49	page 50 – 73
When an essay counts	page 81 – 115	page 74 – 80
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Quick reference footnotes	page 62 – 65	page 139 – 152

## This is an essay

The word ‘essay’, as we use it today, comes from the French writer Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essais [sic]* were published in 1580. The Elizabethan scholar Francis Bacon (the man who may or may not have written Shakespeare’s plays) brought the form into the English language when he published a collection called *Essaies* in 1597. Since Bacon was arguably the founder of modern academic method, it is perhaps no surprise that the essay has become the mainstay of academic communication.

Soon after, Joseph Glanvill gave us the idea that an essay is an incomplete piece of work. In 1665 he wrote *Scepsis scientifica; or confest ignorance, the way to science*, in which he argued that an essay was an ‘imperfect offer at a subject’. What Glanvill meant was that when he wrote his essay he wanted readers to remember he did not know absolutely everything about his subject. This is important to remember. When we write an essay we do not have the space or time to put down everything there is to know about the subject, so we must not try to be the fount of all knowledge. We are just giving our opinion about a little bit of our subject.

The word ‘essay’ also means ‘to try’ or ‘to test’. In this case, the meaning is derived from metal smelting and goes back to biblical times. The molten metal had to be tried or tested in the fire to make sure it was pure enough, or ‘true’. This meaning gives us another clue about how to go about writing an essay, since what we must do is test an idea and demonstrate something to be the case. In other words, an essay is like a scientific experiment, or a court case. It should use evidence in support of an idea.

If we join these two thoughts together—that an essay is an opinion about a little bit of a subject, and that by means of evidence it supports an idea—we come to something like a useful definition of the word ‘essay’.

**An essay is your opinion about a little bit of a subject, in which you use evidence to support your opinion.**

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### What you have just read is an essay. Why?

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- It is an opinion.
- It is based on evidence.
- It does not claim to say everything there is to say about essays.

## Chapter summary

### The purpose of the essay

The undergraduate essay is designed to show that you know about part of a subject area in some depth. It must also show that you can argue your case.

You should bear in mind three important elements of the essay:

<b>Opinion</b>	This is your contribution. You do not have to say anything new, but must argue for a particular viewpoint.
<b>Evidence</b>	This is the result of your research. The evidence you present should lead to the reasons why your opinion is to be believed.
<b>Brevity</b>	An essay is not trying to say everything about a subject. You need to go into depth about just a little bit of the topic under discussion.

# Looking at questions

## 2

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When you start a new topic or module, one of the first things you will be given is a list of essay titles and the date by which it must be finished. The first hurdle to jump is choosing which essay to tackle.

We'll start by considering the sort of titles you might come up against, then we'll go on to how to make your choice.

## Specific and general essay titles

Essay titles most often come in two types, the **specific** and the **general**. Which sort you get will depend upon your level, your institution and the exam board or person who sets the titles. Both specific and general questions should be answered a similar way, since:

**An essay is your opinion about a little bit of a subject, in which you use evidence to support your opinion.**

### Specific essay titles

Specific questions have a narrow focus and will name people or historical contexts or specific problems. They may have steers attached to them in the form of extra information to guide your essay. A-level questions are usually of this type:

1. One way in which psychologists carry out research is by gathering a great deal of data about one individual. This method is known as the case study.

Choose one of the core studies listed below and answer the following questions.



Freud (Little Hans)

Thigpen and Cleckley (multiple personality disorder)

Gardner and Gardner (Project Washoe)

- (a) Describe how the case study method was used in your chosen study
  - (b) Using examples, give two strengths and two weaknesses of the case study as used in your chosen study
  - (c) Suggest one alternative way your study could have been investigated and say how you think this might affect the results
2. How far and in what ways do you see family relationships as a central concern of *The Tempest*? In the course of your answer: show clearly how the play presents family relationships; comment on what the play suggests about family conflicts.
  3. Was military superiority the main reason for the expansion of British influence in India in the period c.1757 to c.1785? Explain your answer.

In the first question with steers A, B, and C, sections A and B of the answer are factual (they contain the **evidence**) and section C contains the **opinion**. In part C, you might argue that Freud made a **more** or **less** powerful argument for the Oedipus Complex by studying one case about a neurotic child in detail than he would have done if he had studied many children who showed different degrees of neurosis.

The second question also asks for **evidence** in the first steer, which asks how family relationships are presented, and for **opinion** in the second steer, which asks you to 'comment' about what the play 'suggests'.

The third question asks for **evidence** in the words 'Was military superiority the *main reason*', which suggests there might be other reasons for you to enumerate. It also asks for **opinion** when it demands you 'explain your answer'.

Specific questions set at university level usually will not have the steers to help:

- To what extent can it be argued that Byron and Keats are second-generation Romantic poets?